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Worried Candidate

Ford's Election Fears Helped Set the Stage For Shake-Up of Staff

He Seeks a Decisive Image; But Acts May Backfire; Rockefeller & New York

Is Ford 'Quite Vulnerable'?

By DENNIS FARNEY

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON—None too early in the game, the Ford election team has come to a numbing conclusion: Candidate Ford could well get beaten.

This conclusion helps explain the stunning developments within the Ford administration in the last two days, particularly Vice President Nelson Rockefeller's request that he be dropped from consideration for the 1976 ticket. In broadest terms, President Ford and his political lieutenants are suddenly running scared and are struggling to get their act together.

The President doesn't appear to have fired Defense Secretary James Schlesinger primarily for political reasons and Vice President Rockefeller, although increasingly vulnerable to being dumped for political reasons, surprised some of the President's closest advisers by bailing out when he did. Yet underlying both the abrupt sacking of Mr. Schlesinger and the recent presidential policy decisions that progressively undercut Mr. Rockefeller's position is some political advice the President has been getting from his worried advisers: Be "presidential," tough, decisive.

Seemingly following this advice, Mr. Ford took pains in his press conference last night to emphasize that he's his own man. "I wanted a team that was my team," he declared.

The big question yesterday, however, was whether the upheaval within the administration might not contribute to the opposite impression of a weak and floundering President; some members of Congress immediately saw that possibility. And the decision to replace Mr. Schlesinger with Donald Rumsfeld may create more problems than it solves for the White House. (For details, see story on page 3.)

Wanted: Nice Guy or Leader?

For more than a year, the President's closest advisers have radiated confidence that Gerald R. Ford's celebrated "openness" and "candor" would give him the edge in 1976. But now there is a growing feeling in the Ford camp that these qualities may be only marginally advantageous—that voters are looking for a leader, not just a nice guy—and that President Ford could lose, either to Republican Ronald Reagan or, more probably, to a Democrat later on.

"I think it's beginning to sink in that we have a contest on our hands," a top campaign strategist says.

One casualty of this growing perception was the moderate-to-liberal Mr. Rockefeller, one of the prime targets of the conservative Mr. Reagan and his followers. It may well be, as Rockefeller aides say, that the Vice President voluntarily removed himself from the ticket yesterday. But if so, he jumped before he was pushed. For the Ford administration, partly for political reasons, was moving in directions that increasingly repudiated Mr. Rockefeller's advice and that made his forced departure ever more likely at some point in the future.

A Feeling of Being "Humphreyized"

The decisive event, one Rockefeller man said yesterday, was President Ford's decision not only to rebuff New York City's request for a federal bailout but to rebuff it in harsh, vindictive terms obviously calculated for political effect. "Rocky had a sense that he was getting Humphreyized" that is, forced, like Vice President Hubert Humphrey under Lyndon Johnson, to defend an administration whose decisions he found distasteful, the Rockefeller aide said. Meanwhile, the Rockefeller position on the ticket obviously was deteriorating by the day. So Mr. Rockefeller quit before he was fired—a decision that caught even close Ford advisers by surprise.

The forced departures from the Ford administration of Defense Secretary Schlesinger and William Colby, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, seem to have been less rooted in political calculations than in Mr. Schlesinger's deteriorating relations with Congress and in President Ford's dismay over the defense chief's deep policy disputes with Secretary of State Kissinger, as well as a long string of disclosures of CIA mismanagement. Although Mr. Kissinger benefits from the firing of arch-rival Schlesinger, many in political Washington yesterday were inclined to doubt that he engineered the firing.

In any event, when Mr. Ford decided to move in this area he moved forcefully—again, it seems, reflecting the "be presidential" advice he has been receiving recently from his political lieutenants.

Underlying this advice is the indication, as disclosed by both public and private polls, that Americans perceive Mr. Ford in an almost schizophrenic way.

Kindly but "Not Terribly Competent"

Essentially, voters seem to think Mr. Ford would make a swell next-door neighbor but wonder whether he has the toughness and the leadership to be President. "People view him as a kindly person but not terribly competent," says a pollster for one of Mr. Ford's many challengers. "He's really quite vulnerable."

To be sure, national polls generally have shown the President running ahead of Mr. Reagan among Republicans and independents, though some surveys have shown the gap to be narrowing in such crucial states as New Hampshire. Meanwhile, a September survey by pollster Louis Harris found Mr. Ford beating every possible Democratic opponent—by as little as 48% to 46% in the case of Edward Kennedy and by as much as 53% to 30% in the case of California Gov. Jerry Brown. But perhaps the more striking aspect of this poll was the finding that, regardless of the opponent, Mr. Ford seemed unable to rise above the 53% level, indicating that he could be vulnerable if the Democrats can unite around a candidate.

Ford men still believe the President's personality will stand him in good stead, a belief shared by some Democratic political consultants. "In Jerry Ford, we do have the all-American boy," says Tobacco Institute lobbyist Jack Mills, a member of Mr. Ford's unofficial kitchen cabinet. "Compared to everybody else, he's Mr. Clean."

However, the assessments of Ford men today are a good deal less optimistic than the talk that emanated from the White House during its almost giddy period after the Mayaguez rescue last spring. They now depict a candidate with some severe handicaps—a man untested in a national campaign, a leader of a political party that commands the allegiance of only about one-fifth of the American voters, and (as one adviser concedes) "slightly sub-articulate" to boot.

"There's no gainsaying the fact that the President isn't a very exciting orator," this adviser says. "He's not a man of great, soaring vision who is likely to lift people up by the force of his ideas or his rhetoric. If the majority of voters are looking for that, then obviously he is going to be in a great deal of trouble next year."

Mr. Rockefeller's departure from the 1976 picture should strengthen Mr. Ford politically, shoring up his shaky position with GOP conservatives. Yesterday Mr. Reagan told reporters he assumed that the Vice President had made his decision because of sentiment "against him on the part of many people in the party." Conservative Republican Sen. James Buckley of New York said the Rockefeller pullout "will eliminate a source of irritation to one element of the Republican Party." Another GOP conservative, Rep. John Ashbrook of Ohio, said, "This will hurt Reagan's chances."